



## Editorial: Springfield, Mo., of all places, considers gay-rights legislation



SEPTEMBER 6, 2012 12:17 AM • BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Could it be that Springfield, Mo., home to three Bible colleges and the national headquarters of the Assemblies of God Church, will become the 10th city in the state to ban discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations because of sexual orientation and gender identity?

It's a longshot, but it's possible. The times, they are a changin'.

Here in the St. Louis region, such proposals often face little opposition. Ferguson in north St. Louis County was the most recent to ban such discrimination, joining Creve Coeur, University City, St. Louis, Olivette, Richmond Heights and Clayton.

The Springfield City Council is working with the churches and other interested parties to develop an ordinance that would add sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes in

employment, housing and public accommodations.

Bob Stephens is the mayor of Springfield, population 160,660, Missouri's third-largest city and a traditional stronghold of social and political conservatism. Mr. Stephens has put together a Commission on Human Rights and Community Relations to work on the ordinance and "to promote understanding and respect among all citizens and provide the community recourse for discriminatory acts."

Gay rights activist Randy Doennig, who owns a small business in the city, said last week that the commission and the ordinance are steps in the right direction.

"It wasn't too long ago that you'd have a hard time passing an ordinance allowing homosexuals to breathe, let alone to own houses or to work without being discriminated against," said Mr. Doennig, who moved to Springfield in 1989 from the nearby town of Monett.

Mr. Doennig said the city council's motivation for tackling the issue is twofold: It's the right thing to do morally and it's smart for business. Not everyone agrees with reason No. 1, but there's a growing consensus on No. 2.

Springfield and its environs are developing rapidly and are home to a variety of colleges, including Missouri State University, Drury University, Ozarks Technical Community College and Evangel University.

"For economic reasons, we need to attract business and be welcoming to all," Mr. Doennig said.

Five of the eight City Council members, including Mr. Stephens, face re-election in April, and they fear voting to ban discrimination could have repercussions at the ballot box.

"There's a huge push back by the churches," Mr. Doennig said. "The bottom line is they motivate voters, and that scares elected leaders."

Even so, the effort by elected officials to include churches in the debate is encouraging. For the community to grow, it must attract people who are not necessarily affiliated with the church communities.

Nine Missouri cities and Jackson County already have passed laws prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. It's simply the right thing to do.

In unanimously approving the inclusion protections, Ferguson Councilman Dwayne James said residents need to know that the city is welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Springfield should put out the welcome mat.

[Top of Page](#)   [Home](#)   [Full Site](#)

© Copyright 2013, stltoday.com, 900 N. Tucker Blvd. St. Louis, MO